

# NOTHINGNESS IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout her life, Emily Dickinson felt loss very keenly.<sup>1</sup> In her early years, especially until 1855, she often complained of her loneliness in her letters. For example, while her brother Austin was teaching in Boston, she often lamented her loneliness in her letters to him.<sup>2</sup> The sense of loss was sometimes occasioned by the death of a friend. Very early in her life, she lost one such friend by death:

I have never lost but one friend near my age and with whom my thoughts and her own were the same . . . I shed no tear, for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin and I felt I could not call her back again I gave

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<sup>1</sup> In his psychological study of Dickinson, Cody guesses that her sense of loss may have been unconsciously related in the poet's mind to her having been shut out at an early age from the heaven of maternal affection through some emotional unresponsiveness or incapacity on the part of her mother. He also says that, in the poetry of the mature woman, the child speaks, still grieving for a source of sustenance that had been lacking or withdrawn—the tenderness and shelter of a mothering woman. (John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson*, 1971, pp. 40-2.)

<sup>2</sup> For example, see letters 44, 45, 52, 58, 59, 62, 63, 65, 104, 107, 114, 116, 123, 139, 151, and 157. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958. The passages from the letters are from this edition, cited as *Letters*, and are identified in this paper by notations within parentheses of "L," followed by the Johnson number.

way to a fixed melancholy.

I told no one the cause of my grief, though it was gnawing at my very heart strings. . . . (L-11, to Abiah Root, 28 March 1846)<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in 1851, when Emily Dickinson was twenty-one years old, many young people died in Amherst. She wrote in a letter to Austin:

It may seem long to *you* since you returned to Boston—how I wish you could stay and never go back again. Everything is so still here, and the clouds are cold and gray—I think it will rain soon—How I am so lonely! . . . I couldn't [*sic*] help thinking of how many were *here* and how many were *away*.

(L-59, To Austin Dickinson, 25 October 1851)<sup>2</sup>

Her feeling of separation from her friends was caused not only by death, and physical separation, but also by mental distance.<sup>3</sup> The "Distance" was "not of Mile or Main," but also of the "Will" that was situated "between Us" (863). She says in one poem:

Now I knew I lost her—  
Not that she was gone—  
But Remoteness travelled  
On her Face and Tongue.

(1219, st. 1: about 1872)<sup>4</sup>

Dickinson seemed always to have had a fear of losing her friends and often complained of her friends' neglecting to write to her.<sup>5</sup> She also

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<sup>1</sup> The letter refers to the death of Sophia Holland, on 29 April 1844.

<sup>2</sup> Sewall calls this year of 1951 "a year of death among the young people of Amherst" (Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974, p. 435). In his book, he often deals with Dickinson's loss of family members, loved ones, and so on throughout her life. For other examples see letters 60, 62, and 63.

<sup>3</sup> William R. Sherwood says in his book: "In Emily Dickinson's mind, there was little difference between the death of a friend and her prolonged absence from him; indeed, in her poetry the death of another is often a metaphor for his absence, and her own death a metaphor for her feelings of isolation." (William R. Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968, p. 68.)

<sup>4</sup> All references to Dickinson's poems are taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1955). The parenthetical numbers refer to the chronological numbering in this work.

<sup>5</sup> For other examples, see letters 26, 30, 31, 32, 39, 40, 50, 69, 103, 107, 161, 173, and 176.

said that she had lost many things when she was only twenty-four years old:

You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved,—sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitter that [sic] death—thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the hemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several precious ones.  
... (L-173, To Susan Gilbert, about 1854)<sup>1</sup>

Everyone experiences the loss of something or someone and feels a subsequent sense of loss. However, in the case of Emily Dickinson the sense of loss and its pain were extraordinarily keen.<sup>2</sup> Although we cannot know all the causes of this sense of loss,<sup>3</sup> we can clearly see various aspects of her sense of loss in her poetry. Indeed, she not only lamented what she had lost, but also developed this sense of loss to a positive appreciation of the concept of nothingness in her poetry. In this paper I would like to trace this development and see how her concept of nothingness appears in her poetry.<sup>4</sup>

## Chapter I: The Sense of Loss

Emily Dickinson sometimes laments that she feels a desperate sense of loss.<sup>5</sup> The pain of loss is often too severe for her to endure; some-

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<sup>1</sup> When she was fifty-one years old, she said: "The Things that never can come back, are several—Childhood—some forms of Hope—the Dead—" (L-733, To Mrs. J. G. Holland, late 1881).

<sup>2</sup> Cody says in his study that an early loss of something of great magnitude and value evidently generated a dimly apprehended and life-long bereavement in Emily Dickinson (Cody, p. 41).

<sup>3</sup> She had also a fear of losing eyesight because of *exotropia*, whose symptoms are "eye strain, blurring of vision, difficulties with prolonged periods of reading, headaches and diplopia." On this matter see Martin Wand and Richard B. Sewall, "'Eyes Be Blind, Heart Be Still': A New Perspective on Emily Dickinson's Eye Problem," *New England Quarterly* (Boston, September 1979), pp. 400-406.

<sup>4</sup> This paper, especially its first and second chapters, draws heavily on the third chapter, "The Concept of Nothingness," of my M. A. thesis, "Nothingness in Emily Dickinson's Poetry" (Tokyo Woman's Christian University, December 1975), unpublished. In that thesis I dealt with "The Negative Expressions" (the first chapter), "The Negative Existences" (the second chapter), and "The Concept of Nothingness" (the third chapter).

<sup>5</sup> In poem 49, she states she has already lost something valuable as often as twice.

times the loneliness even seems to “insane” her, and she cannot feel “peaceful” (L-107). In one letter she described her sense of loss as “I felt all taken away . . .” (L-70).<sup>1</sup> The extremity of loneliness made her senseless in a poem:

Pain—has an Element of Blank—  
It cannot recollect  
When it begun—or if there were  
A time when it was not—  
  
It has no Future—but itself—  
It's Infinite contain  
It's Past—enlightened to perceive  
New Periods—of Pain. (650: about 1862)

When she experiences a great pain, her senses become numb and she cannot perceive anything of the outside world. In another poem she speaks of “The Nerves” “sitting ceremonious, like Tombs” (341). She feels only “A loss of something” and recollects only the fact that she is “bereft” of “what I knew not” (959). By beginning and ending with the word “pain,” the poet visually emphasizes the pain, while between is only “an Element of Blank.” She feels only the pain of loss itself. The sense of time has also disappeared; the moment of constant pain enables one only to “perceive” the next moment of the pain. Such a “delirious Hem” or “Delirium” (708) is like a “Reprieve” given in order that she can prepare herself to “perish” or to live on when “Anguish was the utterest” (414).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, she calls this mental state “Lethargies of loneliness” (PF-120).<sup>3</sup>

Out of the extremity of her fear and her pain of losing, Dickinson came to give up various things voluntarily in order to avoid the eventual greater pain of losing them. She says in one poem:

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter she says: “I have not heard from Mat for months. ‘They say that absence conquers.’ It has vanquished me.” (L-176, To Susan Gilbert, 27 November-3 December 1854)

<sup>2</sup> See also poems 281, 341, 414, 512, 599, and 1046. In poem 937, she says, “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind— / As if my Brain had split.”

<sup>3</sup> Prose Fragment 120 (*Letters*, p. 929).

Could I—then—shut the door—  
Lest *my* beseeching face—at last—  
Rejected—be—of *Her*? (220: about 1861)

She also says in a letter, “ I do not ask so large a pleasure, lest you might deny me—” (L-271). In the same year she wrote the following poem:

Except the Heaven had come so near—  
So seemed to choose My Door—  
The Distance would not haunt me so—  
I had not hoped—before—  
  
But just to hear the Grace depart—  
I never thought to see—  
Afflicts me with a Double loss—  
'Tis lost—And lost to me— (427: about 1862)

If the poet had not had been on the point of getting happiness, her disappointment at her failure would not have haunted her so dreadfully. As it is, her loss is doubled because “ The Grace ” is lost and because she knows of its loss. She regrets having gotten so near to “ Heaven,” only to lose it at last. The repetition of the word “ lost ” in the last line is effective in emphasizing the “ Double loss.” Dickinson knows well that “ We lose—because we win— ” (21). She says “ Your Riches—taught me—Poverty ” (299) and that to go near to “ Tremendousness ” procures “ An Agony ” (963). Therefore, she dares even to avoid her favorite things. “ To know the worst leaves no dread more — ” (281).

Dickinson does not only lament over her losses and her loneliness, however, for she knows there is “ No loss without a gain ” (L-31). At least there is no utter loss that is without meaning. As she says,

The Chemical conviction  
That Nought be lost  
Enable in Disaster  
My fractured Trust— (954, st. 1: about 1864)

This “ Chemical Conviction ” may refer to the first law of Thermodynamics, commonly known as the law of conservation of energy:

“For all changes in an isolated system, the energy remains constant.”<sup>1</sup> The conviction that nothing is lost uselessly, but that all is translated into another thing or power, enables Dickinson, who has once been “fractured” by various losses, to live on even after a great “Disaster.” The loss is thus ultimately not useless at all.

Dickinson also knows that when something is lost or absent, we become keenly conscious of its existence and can really appreciate its value. In a letter she says:

... How I wish you were here, it is really too bad, Austin, at such a time as now—I miss your big Hurrahs, and the famous stir you make, upon all such occasions; but it is a comfort to know that you are here—that your whole soul is here, and tho’ apparently absent, yet present in the highest, and the truest sense.  
(L-72, To Austin Dickinson, 6 February 1852)

The absence of a favorite is thus not meaningless. In fact, a keenly felt absence is much more valuable than an unregarded presence. Dickinson says:

... We’re “with you always, even unto the end”! Tho’ absence be not for “the present, joyous, but grievous,” it shall work out for us a far more exceeding and “eternal weight” of *presence*!  
(L-52, To Austin Dickinson, 23 Sept. 1852)

It is, then, possible to say that “To the Faithful Absence is condensed presence” (L-587).

She also knows time is also best perceived through its loss:

With how much emphasis the poet has said, “We take no note of Time, but from its loss. T’were wise in man to give it then a tongue. . . .”  
(L-13, To Abiah Root, 8 Sept. 1846)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The history of thermodynamics has been closely bound up with the general progress of chemistry and physics since the midnineteenth century. Therefore, Dickinson might even have learned about the law in school. Among Emily Dickinson’s Mount Holyoke Textbooks which were in use during the period 1847–1848 when she was listed as a member of the Middle Class there is a book on chemistry, *Elements of Chemistry* (Benjamin Silliman, Philadelphia: H.C. Peck & T. Bliss, 1841). (Jack L. Capps, *Emily Dickinson’s Reading: 1836–1886*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966, pp. 189–90.)

<sup>2</sup> According to the note in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, this quotation is taken from Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*: “We take no note of Time / But from its loss: to give it then a Tongue / Is wise in man.”

Therefore, she says in a poem:

To disappear enhances—  
The Man that runs away  
Is tintured for an instant  
With Immortality

(1209, st. 1: December 1872)

When something disappears, it is idealized. As time passes, this idealization advances infinitely. The man who disappears is, then, "tintured" with "Immortality," although only "for an instant." Dickinson is not very optimistic; in this stanza the addition of "for an instant" is very ironical, contrasted as it is with "Immortality." This conviction may be called a kind of resignation after great pain.

Dickinson even says that we can take pleasure in feeling gratitude when the lost thing is "restored":

Sweet, to have had them lost  
For news that they be saved—  
The nearer they depart us  
The nearer they, restored

(901, st. 1: about 1864)

It is, then, "Sweet" to have lost something, for she can expect joy when it is regained. The poet even seems to be ready to lose or reject something very positively ("to have had them lost"). The more precious a thing we lose, the more gratitude we feel when it is "restored." The "farther" we lose it, the greater the gratitude becomes. The poet here uses the paradoxical "The nearer" skillfully and ironically, while the entire poem is also, of course, similarly, paradoxical.

Dickinson also knows that those who have never lost anything cannot appreciate the real value of things. This evaluation of loss is closely connected with her natural preference for, and high evaluation of, frugality. She believes that because "Bliss" is "frugal" and tends easily to be lost, she has to taste it "frugally."<sup>1</sup> To her "frugal eye," even a small and primitive thing is precious and delicious.<sup>2</sup> She also believes that she can find divine beauty or the true value of things only

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<sup>1</sup> See poems 1119, 1125, 1376, and 1660.

<sup>2</sup> See poems 23, 181, 791, 994, 1211, and 1477.

in a frugal life.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, she positively chooses such a frugal life.<sup>2</sup>

Dickinson says elsewhere that we have to lose things once in order to appreciate their value and so get another kind of "Gain":

Best Gains—must have the Losses' Test—  
To constitute them—Gains— (684: about 1863)

Only through their loss can "Gains" become really valuable. Also, in order to get "each ecstatic instant" we must pay "an Anguish" precisely equivalent to the ecstasy (125). We have to see "the Grave" first, and then we can see "the Sun" (L-275).

On the other hand, loss or failure is, paradoxically, evidence of the greatness or the eternal grace of an object or a hope. She says:

Had I presumed to hope—  
The loss had been to Me  
A Value—for the Greatness' Sake—  
As Giants—gone away—  
  
Had I presumed to gain  
A Favor so remote—  
The failure but confirm the Grace  
In further Infinite—  
  
'Tis failure—not of Hope  
But Confident Despair—  
Advancing on Celestial Lists—  
With faint—Terrestrial power—  
  
'Tis Honor—though I die—  
For That no Man obtain  
Till He be justified by Death—  
This—is the Second Gain— (522: about 1862)

Even if she fails to gain "A Favor," the failure only "confirms" that its grace is so celestial that it is beyond her grasp. Therefore, the poet does not at all feel despair because of the loss. She even rejoices to learn thereby that the object is very celestial. Although the feeling of failure is increased because of her sense of "faint Terrestrial power,"

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<sup>1</sup> See poem 67, 135, 167, 690, 793, and 818.

<sup>2</sup> See poems 40, 773, 818, 819, 1081, 1093, 1188, 1263, 1382, and 1430. On the frugality in Dickinson's poetry, see also my M.A. thesis, "Nothingness in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," pp. 25-33.



it is not a question of the failure of the poet; therefore, she experiences only a "Confident Despair," which cannot make her really desperate. Like the poet, no person can "obtain" true success until his death. This fact is another evidence for the "Greatness" of the hope ("the Second Gain").

To lose or reject something valuable brings about in Dickinson even a kind of "stolid Bliss," such as is gained by "Patience" through "transports" (1153). For her, "to lose" is "sweeter than to gain" (1754). In one poem she says:

How sweet I shall not lack in Vain—  
But gain—thro' loss—Through Grief—obtain—  
(from 968: about 1864)

Similarly, in the following poem she describes "Loss" as divine:

Of so divine a Loss  
We enter but the Gain,  
Indemnity for Loneliness  
That such a Bliss has been. (1179: about 1871)

The poet counts ("enters") only "the Gain" of "so divine a Loss"; that is, she has decided to note in her mind only the affirmative side of the loss. "Such a Bliss" of "the Gain" compensates for the "Loneliness" of the loss. Therefore, she can paradoxically say elsewhere, "Just lost, when I was saved!" (160). In another poem she writes:

When One has given up One's life  
The parting with the rest  
Feels easy, as when Day lets go  
Entirely the West (853, st. 1: about 1864)

If we have lost the most important thing, we do not suffer from the loss of anything else. Paradoxically, seeing the utter darkness sometimes makes us feel easy, for we can then perceive the tenderness of the night.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much later, when she was fifty-three, she said, in a letter, "Owning but little Stock in the 'Gold of Ophir' I am not subject to large Reverses—though may not the small prove irreparable?" (L-395, To Mrs. J. G. Holland, about September 1873.)

Moreover she says that "To miss" is "power" (L-364) and that "A Wounded Deer—leaps highest—" (165). She even describes "Absence" as an electrical power (L-786).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a life of rejection or negation can be called "sumptuous Destitution" (1382). Therefore, she can say:

Take all away—  
The only thing worth larceny  
Is left—the Immortality— (1365: March 1874)

In order to get some eternal truth or beauty, she willingly dares to reject all earthly delights.<sup>2</sup>

## Chapter II: The Concept of Nothingness

Dickinson highly appreciated the concept of "Opposites" or "Negatives" and had a preference for various negative concepts, such as "silence," "white," "impossibility," "frugality," and "negative expressions." However, she did not thereby take refuge in cynicism. Rather, she found value in such negative existences, or at least tried to do so in her poetry. She rejected the positive in order to choose the negative, and even translated the negative into a positive concept. Here, however, I wish to analyze only her concept of "Negatives" and, further, that of "Nothingness."<sup>3</sup>

When we see a thing, we recognize it only relatively. Particularly when we see a wonderful or superior thing, we cannot grasp its details without comparing it with another thing. Emily Dickinson shows this conception as follows:

We wee—Comparatively—  
The Thing so towering high  
We could not grasp its segment  
Unaided—Yesterday—

<sup>1</sup> See also letters 422 and 951.

<sup>2</sup> In another poem she says: "Satisfaction—is the Agent / of Satiety / want—a quiet Commissary / For Infinity" (1036, st. 1: about 1865).

<sup>3</sup> As for some other aspects, see my own "Silence in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *Essays and Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Tokyo Woman's Christian Univ., Winter 1973, and the first chapter, "The Negative Expression," and the second chapter, "The Negative Existences," in my M.A. thesis, "Nothingness in Emily Dickinson's Poetry."

This Morning's finer Verdict—  
Makes scarcely worth the toil—  
A furrow—Our Cordillera—  
Our Appenine—a Knoll—

Perhaps 'tis kindly—done us—  
The Anguish—and the loss—  
The Wrenching—for His Firmament  
The Thing belonged to us—

To spare these Striding Spirits  
Some Morning of Chagrin—  
The waking in a Gnat's—embrace—  
Our Giants—further on— (534: about 1862)

Thus, without comparing it with another, inferior thing, the finer thing's worth can scarcely be recognized. Therefore, it is natural that Dickinson, in evaluating loss, should come to highly appreciate the existence of "Opposites" or "Negatives."

The attractive power of "Opposites" or "Negatives" is demonstrated in the following poem:

'Tis Opposites—entice—  
Deformed Men—ponder Grace—  
Bright fires—the Blanketless—  
The Lost—Day's face—

The Blind—esteem it be  
Enough Estate—to see—  
The Captive—strangles new—  
For deeming—Beggars—play—

To lack—emamor Thee—  
Tho' the Divinity—  
Be only  
Me—

(355: about 1862)

It is its opposite or its negative which makes something attractive and precious. "Deformed Men" really appreciate the worth of "Grace," who have no blanket truly desire to get "Bright fires," and a man who has lost his way at night really desires to meet the sun rising. In the second stanza also, she lists some examples. Only "The Blind" know the worth of seeing, and "The Captive" is choked with emotion on that "Beggars—play—." Therefore, "To lack" holds a kind of charm

for us. Consequently, she continues, or "she hopes that" "Thou" will come to highly appreciate "Me," just like "Grace," and so on, when she disappears from him.<sup>1</sup>

Emily Dickinson believes that the power of "Opposites" or "Negatives" is their power to compensate for or balance that which is lost—what she in one place terms the "Odd":

The Zeroes—taught us—Phosphorus—  
We learned to like the Fire  
By playing Glaciers—when a Boy  
And Tinder—guessed—by power  
Of Opposite—to balance Odd—  
If White—a Red—must be!  
Paralysis—our Primer—dumb—  
Unto Vitality! (689: ealy 1863)

The coldness teaches us the power of "Phosphorus," just as she learns the importance of the "Fire" while playing with ice. She also learns that although the "Tinder" is "White," it quickly burns "Red" when struck with a flint. The whiteness is, in fact, the sign of the quickness of the tinder to be kindled.<sup>2</sup> This power may be called the "power / Of Opposite—to balance Odd—." The knowledge of the importance of the fire is thus obtained by the "power of Opposite," coldness. Therefore, the poet even guesses that "Paralysis" and being "Dumb" after a loss must be "our Primer," teaching us to live with much more vitality than before the loss. Even if we lose something, in place of it other valuable things will compensate for the loss as "Paralysis" serves as a "Primer" to "Vitality." This is obviously related to "the Chem-

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<sup>1</sup> Lindberg-Seyersted establishes that a parallelism of form as well as of idea is found in Emily Dickinson's poetry; it may comprise a whole poem or may be contained within smaller units: stanzas or part of stanzas, lines, and so on. She uses this poem (355) as an eloquent demonstration of the theme and the method of opposites. (Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *The Voice of the Poet*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968, pp. 199-205.)

<sup>2</sup> The color white is also one of Dickinson's favorite negative things. In this respect, see my M. A. thesis, "Nothingness in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," especially pp. 51-65. In poem 365 the color white is a symbol of the vitality and the divinity which are produced in an extreme ordeal and which help the poet mold poetic experience into real poetry.

ical conviction / That Nought be lost" (954). Therefore, the "Zeroes" in the first line indicate not only the coldness of "Glaciers," but also "Opposites" or "Negatives," or they have even the utterly literal meaning of "Zero," or nothingness. The "Zeroes" teach her the power of a negative "to balance Odd" variously.<sup>1</sup>

From such a conception of "Negatives," Dickinson came to see the important meaning to be found in nothingness, that is, absolute negation or utter loss. From her early years, she meditated on the meaning of "nothingness," as she says in a letter:

I discovered *nothing*, up in the sky somewhere, and gazed intensely at it, for quite a half an hour. (L-154, To Edward Everett Hale, 13 January 1854)

In her mind, then, "nothing" is not "an empty blank," but a substance (L-32).<sup>2</sup>

In the following poem Dickinson uses the term "nothing" as a metaphor for the fluff or the pappus of the white hairs of the dandelion:

It's little Ether Hood  
Doth sit upon its Head—  
The millinery supple  
Of the sagacious God—

Till when it slip away  
A nothing at a time—  
And Dandelion's Drama  
Expires in a stem.

(1501: about 1880)

The white pappus is here described as a divine hood made of ether. It is a very "supple" hood used by "the sagacious God." It does not appear to have anything in it, but it nonetheless contains seeds. Therefore, she calls it "A Nothing," treating it grammatically as a countable substance. When this "Nothing" which contains the invisible seeds slips away from the stem, the "Dandelion's Drama / Expires." Thus, this "nothing" is not "an empty blank" after all, but

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<sup>1</sup> The high appreciation of the negative of Dickinson can also be observed in the following: "... To know whether we are in Heaven or on Earth is one of the most impossible of the mind's decisions, [and] but I think the balance always leans in favor of the negative—if Heaven is negative" (PF-114).

<sup>2</sup> See also Letter 79.

includes infinite possibilities, like the seeds within it. Indeed, to her, this “nothing” is the seed of her poetry.

Dickinson says elsewhere that “nothing” is an infinite thing:

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes—  
Incredulous of Ought  
But Blank—and steady Wilderness—  
Diversified by Night—  
  
Just Infinites of Nought—  
As far as it could see—  
So looked the face I looked upon—  
So looked itself—on Me— (458, sts. 1 and 2: about 1862)

The poet cannot credit anything (“Ought”) except “Blank” and “steady Wilderness,” or “Just Infinites of Nought,” because they appear as they are. They appear incredible, and so, paradoxically, she credits them. Therefore, we can understand the “Ought” or the second line as also including a “Nought.” Here, she compares nothing to a “steady Wilderness” which is “diversified by Night.” In such a “Wilderness” various wild beasts are freely active at night. This “nothing” is also “Diversified,” with various meanings when it is approached from the negative side. Dickinson seemed to know well that the term “ought” has two meanings which are diametrically opposite: “nought” or “cipher,” and “anything.”<sup>1</sup>

In the following poem Dickinson uses “nothing” and “all” very similarly:

More than the Grave is closed to me—  
The Grave and that Eternity  
To which the Grave adheres—  
I cling to nowhere till I fall—  
The Crash of nothing, yet of all—  
How similar appears— (1503: about 1880)

The poet here declares that she cannot accept the death which the normal Christians believed in, nor can she believe in that “Eternity” which is

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<sup>1</sup> Dickinson skillfully uses various negative expressions, especially the negative pronoun “nothing,” to express this paradoxical concept. Regarding this point, see Chapter I, “The Negative Expressions,” in my “Nothingness in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” pp. 4-24.

its promised sequel. When death comes to her, then, it will be a “Crash of nothing.” Here, the “nothing” represents the poet’s state as lost in the eyes of Puritanism. Yet, death comes to every person in just this same way, too. She rejects or negates, though, the others’ criticism of her as a lost sheep. “Nothing” and “all” can be similar to one another, or even the same, from another point of view, such as that of God.

“Nought” can also be “The Object Absolute”:

Perception of an object costs  
Precise the Object’s loss—  
Perception in itself a Gain  
Replying to its Price—

The Object Absolute—is nought—  
Perception sets it fair  
And then upbraids a Perfectness  
That situates so far—

(1071: about 1866)

In the course of being perceived, an object loses its objectivity. The object is recreated by the subjectivity of the perceiver. The object’s loss means perception’s gain. Such a recreation of the object in perception is important. The “Object Absolute” thus becomes of no importance (“nought”) or is even lost. In the next line, however, the poet says, “Perception sets it fair.” If “it” refers to “nought,” the “nought” comes to be a positive entity. “Nought” is the “Perfectness” of an object that “situates so far” that we cannot perceive it at all. Thus, “nothing” is, in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, not at all an empty blank, but rather “all,” in which “you can see any [sic]” (L-32).

### Chapter III: Nothingness in Dickinson’s Poetry

Out of this evaluation of “loss” and this concept of “nothingness” Dickinson came to reject various common, minor luxuries in order to make herself “nothing” and to grasp “nothingness” in her poetry. Actually, she rejected outside society and lived a secluded life, wearing only white, colorless dresses. Here, though, I would like to examine only her rejection or her choice of “nothingness” as it appears in her poetry.

In the following poem Dickinson calls her rejection “Renunciation”:

Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue—  
The letting go  
A Presence—for an Expectation—  
Not now—  
The putting out of Eyes—  
Just Sunrise—  
Lest Day—  
Day’s Great Progenitor—  
Outvie  
Renunciation—is the Choosing  
Against itself—  
Itself to justify  
Unto itself—  
When larger function—  
Make that appear—  
Smaller—that Covered Vision—Here— (745: about 1863)

The poet has to let go of all of herself, even her own life (“A Presence”), in order to actualize her “Expectation” or hope in the future. As a result, she must endure a piercing sense of loss. She must also give up her eyesight after the sun has risen, lest “Day” should “Outvie” the beauty of the “Sunrise,” which is made beautiful by the contrasting negative of night. The poet here implies that even a beauty that is not abundant in quantity seems celestial to her who rejects seeing other beauties. Thus, her “Renunciation” is not truly a sacrifice. It is her own positive choice “Against” herself or a temporary self denial<sup>1</sup> in the earthly world (“Not now”) in order to “Justify” or help herself in

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<sup>1</sup> When Emily Dickinson went to Boston in 1846, she visited the Chinese Museum. There, she became interested in the “self denial” of two Chinese who had overcome the practice of Opium. She said in a letter: “One of them is a Professor of music in China and the other is a teacher of a writing school at home. They were both wealthy and not obliged to labor but they were also Opium Eaters and fearing to continue the practice lest it destroy their lives yet unable to break the “rigid chain of habit” in their own land. They left their family’s & came to this country. They have now entirely overcome the practice. There is something peculiarly interesting to me in their self *denial*. . .” (L-13, To Abiah Root, Boston, 8 Sept. 1846). This experience may have been one of the causes of her appreciation of rejection or negation.



Heaven hereafter. Therefore, she calls this “Renunciation” “a piercing Virtue.”

Dickinson’s positive loss or rejection is shown also in the following poem:

The Soul selects her own Society—  
Then—shuts the Door—  
To her divine Majority—  
Present no more—  
  
Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—  
At her low Gate—  
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat—  
  
I’ve known her—from an ample nation—  
Choose One—  
Then—close the Valves of her attention—  
Like Stone— (303: about 1862)

“The Soul” decides to shut “the Door” to protect “her divine Majority,” choosing “her own Society.” Her closing of “the Valves of her attention” is as heavy, cold, and firm as a “Stone.” She knows that she who is living “behind the door” seems very strange to other people. Once she goes into this personal world, though, she “would never be Common” again and “Difference would begin—” (430).

There is no clear boundary between “insanity” and “sanity” in Dickinson; indeed, she declares, “Much Madness is divinest Sense” (435), for she chooses “the Oddity” or “Madness” for herself. When she had much pain, she preferred to give up normality of mind in order to support her nerves. She says, for instance, “If your Nerve, deny you— / Go above your Nerve—” (292). There is also this poem:

There is a pain—so utter—  
It swallows substance up—  
Then covers the Abyss with Trance—  
So Memory can step  
Around—across—upon it—  
As one within a Swoon—  
Goes safely—where an open eye—  
Would drop Him—Bone by Bone. (599: about 1862)

In the "Trance" or "Swoon" she can live "safely" without dropping into "the Abyss." If she had normal senses ("an open eye"), her nerves would be broken down completely ("Bone by Bone"). As it is, though, in her "Delirium" she can feel even "satisfaction":

I've dropped my Brain—My Soul is numb—  
The Veins that used to run  
Stop palsied—'tis Paralysis  
Done perfecter on stone

Vitality is Carved and cool.  
My nerve in Marble lies—  
A Breathing Woman  
Yesterday—Endowed with Paradise.

Not dumb—I had a sort that moved—  
A Sense that smote and stirred—  
Instincts for Dance—a caper part—  
An Aptitude for Bird—

Who wrought Carrara in me  
And chiselled all my tune  
Were it a Witchcraft—were it Death—  
I've still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere—Motion—Breath—  
Though Centuries beyond,  
And every limit a Decade—  
I'll shiver, satisfied.

(1046: about 1865)

Even in her "Paralysis," she has "Vitality." She seems to be satisfied, believing that even if she looks "numb" and "dumb" now, her poetry ("my tune") will move and breathe freely ("I've still a chance to strain / To Being") "somewhere" and someday in the future, even "Though Centuries beyond."

Dickinson sometimes desires even death in order to lessen her pain:

The Heart asks Pleasure—first—  
And then—Excuse from Pain—  
And then—those little Anodynes  
That deaden suffering—

And then—to go to sleep—  
And then—if it should be  
The will of its Inquisitor  
The privilege to die—

(536: about 1862)

The poet here positively wants to lose the use of her normal senses in order to make numb her feelings and thus, paradoxically, to feel no sense of loss. Only such a great despair as that occasioned by utter loss can make her sense of loss complete—and so completely dead.

It is a kind of “Murder” or suicide “by degrees” to “Drop her own brain” and the “Thought to be alive” (762).<sup>1</sup> Dickinson calls this attempt “the White Exploit”<sup>2</sup> in the following poem:

Those who have been in the Grave the longest—  
Those who begin Today—  
Equally perish from our Practise—  
Death is the other way—  
  
Foot of the Bold did least attempt it—  
It—is the White Exploit—  
Once to achieve, annuls the power  
Once to communicate— (922: about 1864)

No one, not even the bold person, can attempt this kind of death. Although it entails a renunciation of “the power” to communicate with the earthly world, however, she is sure she can thereby get something more valuable than the transient joys of this world. She shuts her eyes “arrogantly” in this death in life, believing in this other “way—to see” eternal truth or beauty (627).<sup>2</sup> Kher calls this renunciation “Absence” and says:

Absence as withdrawal embodies a special type of retreat from the world, a retreat in which the artist cultivates his or her own mode of encountering the world. This withdrawal is not a running away from reality, but a process by which the artist ripens to a deeper perception of reality. Dickinson’s own “deliberate and conscious” seclusion and aesthetic privacy should be interpreted as a creative device to meet the world on her own terms.<sup>4</sup>

In another poem she admits that her renunciation is “in Vision” and

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<sup>1</sup> See also poem 708.

<sup>2</sup> In poem 528, she also calls this “Exploit” “the Right of the White Election!” The color white, which is the negative of coloration, is closely associated with death and purity in her poetry. See poems 104, 158, 258, 271, 274, 280, 287, 325, 341, 539, 615, 759, 1482, and 1669.

<sup>3</sup> See also poem 759.

<sup>4</sup> Inder Nath Kher, *The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson’s Poetry*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 62.

“in Veto” and that her death in life is “the Grave’s Repeal” (528). She and “the Grave” “Have sobbed ourselves almost to sleep, / Our only Lullaby—” (588). In order to survive, she would rather be left “in the Atom’s Tomb” or in “Paralysis.” Then she could be “Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb,” instead of being miserable (376).

Therefore, we can say Dickinson’s death is a drama or a kind of dream without awakening, “Leading to no Day—” (450). She says in another poem:

We dream—it is good we are dreaming—  
It would hurt us—were we awake—  
But since it is playing—kill us,  
And we are playing—shriek—

What harm? Men die—externally—  
It is a truth—of Blood—  
But we—are dying in Drama—

And Drama—is never dead— (531, sts. 1 and 2: about 1862)

When she thus dies “in Drama,” she can rise above the “external death” she describes in many poems; looking at death and dying “at play” is a means of conquering the fear of “Death” or despair. In it she can live “on Dread” (770). If she should “stop hoping,” she could, paradoxically, have “Gay, Ghastly, Holiday” (281). We can also say that “Oddness” and “Death” in Dickinson are just “play”; as she says, “She died at play” (75) and enjoys “death at play” (369).

In the world of Dickinson, which exists behind the “Door” shutting out the outside world, everything can easily be reversed by a “Door” or “Panel.” “Life” and “Death” exist separately on the opposite sides of a “Panel”; she prefers to live in the playful “Death” “behind the Door”:

’Tis not that Dying hurts us so—  
’Tis Living—hurts us more—  
But Dying—is a different way—

A Kind behind the Door— (335, st. 1: about 1862)<sup>1</sup>

Because Dickinson can go freely back and forth between the two

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<sup>1</sup> See poems 920 and 1640. In a letter she says, “Life in death we’re lengthy at, death the hinge to life” (L-281, To Louise and Fanny Norcross, Late 1863).

worlds on the two sides of "the Door," there is to her no firm distinction between "life" and "death." Sometimes the door itself disappears and she says that her "Doom" is to live in "the House without the Door" between "Death" and "life" (475). To do so is, however, difficult:

To die—without the Dying  
And live—without the Life  
This is the hardest Miracle  
Propounded to Belief. (1017: abot 1865)

We may also say that such a "Death in life" is a "life in nothingness," one which rejects normal life.<sup>1</sup> In this poem the repetition of "without" emphasizes the negativeness of her remarkably abnormal life.

Dickinson believes that if she is "nothing" after her death in life, having rejected the outside world, she can still, paradoxically, be everything:

You said that I "was Great"—one Day—  
Then "Great" it be—if that please Thee—  
Or Small—or any size at all—  
Nay—I'm the size suit Thee—  
  
Tall—like the Stag—would that?  
Or lower—like the Wren—  
Or other heights of Other Ones  
I've seen?  
  
Tell which—it's dull to guess—  
And I must be Rhinoceros  
Or Mouse  
At once—for Thee—  
  
So say—if Queen it be—  
Or Page—please Thee—  
I'm that—or nought—  
Or other thing—if other thing there be—  
With just this Stipulus—  
I suit Thee— (738: about 1863)

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<sup>1</sup> In poem 508, she says "I'm ceded—I've stopped being Their's." See also poems 528, 588, and 745. In a letter, she says, "'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?"

Here, out of her love for another, the poet even negates herself and becomes completely egoless. By making herself "nought" or "nothing," she can be everything that the loved one likes. "Nought" is thus here a means to be "everything."

She can be innocent like a child by throwing away common sense and common knowledge. In poem 196 she encourages herself by pretending to be childish,<sup>1</sup> shutting "the door tight" to keep out the outside world. The innocence<sup>2</sup> of a child is also very much appreciated as a negative virtue. She believes that only the child, with its "fresh" eyes without any "Doubt" or "Scruple," can see the truth or celestial beauty ("Paradise"). Therefore, she calls a child the "Ruler of Nought" (637). The child may seem powerless and so the ruler of "nought" or nothing, but really this "nought" is a substantial nothingness capable of becoming or embodying anything and everything.

Then, Dickinson declares proudly that she is "Nobody":

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us?  
Don't tell! They'd advertise—you know!  
  
How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog—  
To tell one's name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog! (288: about 1861)

To be a "Somebody" would restrict her existence and make herself others', oppressing her own soul and its free imagination.<sup>3</sup> In the second stanza, she indicates that to be "Somebody" or to get fame would make herself and her poetry very cheap and common.<sup>4</sup> Actually,

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<sup>1</sup> See also poems 77, 486, 588, and 613. Actually she wished to return to her childhood. See letters 94, 115, 182, 417, 717, and 824.

<sup>2</sup> Dickinson highly values "impossibility," "ignorance," "innocence," and "darkness." See my M. A. thesis, pp. 34-50.

<sup>3</sup> About the same period as this poem, she also wrote: "I'm ceded— / I've stopped being Theirs— / The name They dropped upon my face / With water in the country church / Is finished using, now" (508).

<sup>4</sup> In poem 709 she says, "Publication—is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man." See also poem 1427.

Dickinson was very disappointed to learn that some punctuation in her poems had been corrected by editors without her consent when three of her poems were published in her lifetime. Thereafter she rejected all talk of the publication of her poems. Therefore, this poem also seems to declare her rejection of publication. To Dickinson "to be Somebody" means only telling her own name noisily, thus making herself unpleasantly conspicuous. She prefers to renounce the world and to be a "Nobody" whom nobody knows, like "this little Rose":

Nobody knows this little Rose—  
It might a pilgrim be  
Did I not take it from the ways  
And lift it up to thee. (from 35: about 1858)<sup>1</sup>

Then she could be "Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb" (376). Here, "Nought," which means "nothing" or "worthless," suggests her life in nothingness. At the same time it is the pun of "nought" and "naught" or "naughty." Dickinson can mischievously become anything by making herself nothing or "nobody" in her life in nothingness.

We can get a glimpse of Dickinson's conception of the nothingness between limited life and eternal death in the following poem:

A Clock stopped—  
Not the Mantel's—  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing—  
That just now dangled still—  
  
An awe came on the Trinket!  
The Figures hunched, with pain—  
Then quivered out of Decimals—  
Into Degreeless Noon—  
  
It will not stir for Doctor's—  
This Pendulum of snow—  
This Shopman importunes it—  
While cool—concernless No—

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<sup>1</sup> For other examples, see poems 136 and 1147.

Nods from the Gilded pointers—  
Nods from the Seconds slim—  
Decades of Arrogance between  
The Dial life—  
And Him—

(287: about 1861)

At the beginning of the first stanza Dickinson declares "A Clock stopped—." The mantel clock may have a "puppet," but the clock is not the mantel's; it belongs to someone or it is a detached, isolated thing. At the same time, there is a hint that the clock is not a common one by the strong denial and the dash ("Not the Mantel's—"). This clock is compared to the life of a man or to the time of human life. The words describing the puppet, such as "bowing" and "dangled" in this stanza and "hunched," "quivered," "stir," and "nods" in the latter stanzas, also invoke human behavior. This clock with a puppet is a very suitable personification of human life. Concurrently, the reiterated "t" and "p" sounds suggest the heart's pulsation as well as the sound of a clock. Now this life's clock is stopped, and the "puppet" is dangled. This death is still and silent ("still"). This stillness is emphasized by the rhyming "skill," indicating the elaborate action of a clock maker. However, not even a skillful clock maker can fix *this* clock.

In the second stanza, Dickinson calls death "An awe." The images of "Trinket" and "puppet" emphasize the contrast between man's temporal existence and the awefulness and poignancy of death. The puppet or the man is "hunched" with the "pain" of the death blow. The word "Figures" indicates the numbers of the clock face, but it also reminds us of the distorted face of the dying. Beside "Figures," there are many images of numerals, which are closely connected with the main image of a timepiece to emphasize the limits of human life.<sup>1</sup> Human life is counted and limited by time or numerals. Therefore, to Dickinson death seems to mean going out of the limited "Decimals" of human time into eternity, which has no numbers ("Degreeless Noon").

Why, though, is "Noon" "Degreeless"? When the two pointers

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<sup>1</sup> The images of numerals used in this poem are "decimals," "Seconds," "Decades" and "Dial," while the images specifically connected with time are "Clock," "Noon," "Pendulum," "Pointers," "Seconds," and "Dial."



of a clock have gone around 360 degrees, they come to the start of a new cycle of 360 degrees. Noon is, then, at once the end and the beginning. Moreover, when a clock strikes the hour of noon, the two pointers are superimposed, and there is no angle or degree left. Therefore, if the clock stops at noon, the clock can escape out of the limited world into measureless eternity. Death thus means the beginning of life as well as its end. To the poet death is the way to escape time and its limitations.

In the third stanza Dickinson again says that no "Doctor" or clock maker can fix this life-clock, for the "Pendulum" of this clock is not a human heart with warm, red blood, but a human heart with cold, white "snow." This "snow" symbolizes the whiteness, coldness, and stillness of the dead. Similarly, the "Shopman" cannot call him back. The only answer is a "cool—concernless No." This last denial, "No," is placed at the height of the absolute denial of death by the three preceding negations: "Not," "Can't," and "not." "No" is emphasized also by its rhyme with "snow" and by its similarity to the last word of the second stanza, "Degreeless Noon—." The "-less" suffixes in the words "concernless" and "Degreeless" also serve to emphasize the negation of death. Death is "concernless" and "cool" toward the living; the living cannot get any answers from death. The absolute denial—"No"—seems to be death itself. In "No" does death exist.

The contrast or the distance between life and death comes to a climax in the fourth stanza. When the two pointers and the "slim" second hand of a clock come to 12 at the same time, time is renewed again. By only a little swaying ("Nods") of the "pointers" and "the Seconds," life can be renewed. In only a second, that is, the degree can be changed from 359° to 360° or 0°. Similarly, soul easily withdraws from life as counted by time ("the Gilded pointers" and "the Seconds slim") and moves to eternity. The change from life to death is very quick.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In two other poems death and life are described as being separated by only a door (335 and 920).

However, between the "Dial life" and "Him" there yet lies an enormous distance, "Decades of Arrogance." Dickinson does not tell us who this "Him" is. Or, rather, the poet herself does not know who He is. He may be God, or the soul of the dead person who is now in this "Degreeless Noon." Or He may be the personification of death itself. At first the word "Arrogance" seems very abrupt, but if we consider the cool negation of death, it is very suitable here. Death is absolute and irrevocable. Its distinctiveness is also emphasized by the contrast between the fullness and variety of sounds, and by the incessant motion of the first two lines and the stillness of the last two lines. Dickinson also shows the distance visually in this stanza. She boldly separates the line into two and puts a dash between the lines. In the dash after the "Dial life" there exists a distance. This dash constitutes a visual separation.

At the same time we can read the last stanza as Dickinson's defense of an arrogant life of nothingness, or "death in life." Once she greatly despairs and her normal senses are destroyed, she arrogantly escapes from ordinary life to the life of negation which is to be found in the space of "Decades" between the "Dial life" and eternal death. She is now in a state of "death in life," separated from normal life by a door, rejecting any call from the outside world. Her only answer to any such call is a "Cool—concernless No—." In this state, the period of her unusual life can be counted by neither "Seconds" nor eternity, but only by "Decades." Her arrogant and rather grotesque life lurks in the dash between "the Dial life" and "Him," that is, between limited life and eternal death, or God. After "Him" her secret "death in life" persists silently. The arrogant phrasing itself seems subtly to show her arrogant life, content with "nothingness."

## CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson, who had a keen sense of loss and who had realized the value of loss, chose rejection consciously and positively in living her life. By giving up many things she could avoid a great pain of loss and

could see their real value. In fact, from her sense of loss she could get the energy to create poetry. To her, the sense of loss was thus a kind of stepping stone to the creation of poetry.

On the other hand, she also highly appreciated the concept of "Opposites" or "Negatives." From her evaluation of the ideas of negatives and loss and her appreciation of negative ideas, such as "frugality" and "impossibility,"<sup>1</sup> she came to appreciate absolute negation or utter loss, nothingness. To Dickinson, "nothing" is a substance containing infinite possibilities. She even negated normal life with its earthly delights in order to make nothingness in her poetry.

In one of her poems:

By homely gift and hindered Words  
The human heart is told  
Of Nothing—  
"Nothing" is the force  
That removates the World— (1563: about 1883)

Because of the poor ability and the insufficiency of "Words" for communication we cannot express any wonderful thing: "We have to be silent about what cannot be told."<sup>2</sup> However, we can also interpret these lines as meaning that because of our impotence and the insufficiency of language for communication, we can notice the existence and even the value of "Nothing" or non-existence. Besides, we can also see in the "homely gift" "ideas with minus signs," such as "frugality" and "white"; similarly, in the "hindered Words" we can see various negative expressions. By such negative ideas and negative expressions Dickinson can find value and power in "Nothing" and can even express unspeakable wonder in her poetry. She says at one point, "'Nothing' is the force / That renovates the World—." In this

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<sup>1</sup> On the negative ideas in her poetry in detail, see my M. A. thesis, pp. 25-66.

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of silence and the insufficiency of language for communication in Dickinson, see "Silence in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," especially pp. 27-38. Dickinson says in a letter, "I love silence so—I can't halt (stop) of sound—but ones that talk of nought all day . . ." (L-843, To Otis P. Lord, about 1883); she also says elsewhere, "Saying nothing, My Aunt Katie, sometimes says the Most" (L-408, To Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser, late January 1874).

"Nothing" she implies the negation or rejection of various positive delights or existences, and also implies her own life in nothingness or death in life—frugal, impotent, innocent, white, and silent. By "the force" of such "Nothing" she finds a much more celestial beauty in "Nothing" and recreates it in her poetry. By choosing "Nothing," she also makes this "Nothing" into "something" and even into a much more precious thing. The negative and the affirmative, or nothing and all, exist back-to-back. By Dickinson they can then be reversed for an instant, just like life and death reversed by a hinge in her poetry.

In her later years, Dickinson once wrote in a letter:

Sweet One—to make the bright week noxious, that was once so gay, have you quite the warrant? Also, my Naughty one, too seraphic Naughty, who can sentence you? Certainly not my enamored Heart. Now my blissful Sophist, you that can make "Dont" "Do"—though forget that I told you so. . . .

(L-561, To Otis P. Lord, about 1878)

The term "Naughty" means "mischievous" or "wayward." But, she continues to say, "Yoy that can make 'Dont' 'Do'." Therefore, we may also understand it etymologically as an adjective form of "naguht," or "nothing." It seems that she believes that a "Naughty" person can mischievously make the negative have an affirmative meaning. Therefore, she can triumphantly declare of herself, "I am naughtiest of all" (L-771, To Margaret Maher, October 1882).

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